

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF WEST GIPPSLAND

BY PHYLLIS REICHL\*

**ABSTRACT:** The region which was called West Gippsland after Count Strzelecki's journey in 1840-41 was known from the earliest period of European settlement. In 1797-98 George Bass navigated from Port Jackson, named Westernport and surveyed much of the coast. Settlement, however, remained marginal, temporary and sporadic until the period of selection which began in earnest, eastward from Dandenong along the Upper Gippsland road in the late 1860s, but not until the late 1870s in the steep forested hill terrain of the Strzeleckis. The conversion of this forest country into dairy farms was consistently fraught with difficulties and even disaster, so that by the 1930s the area of successfully settled lands had contracted everywhere to the more favourable valleys and lower hill slopes. The mountain ash country, denuded of its valuable timber cover by the pioneers, reverted to useless bracken, blackberry and regeneration scrub. The expansion of settlement in the future will undoubtedly take place in the zones of fuel exploitation and it is here, in the Latrobe Valley and along the Bass Strait coasts, that there is greatest need for research into the patterns of settlement.

### INTRODUCTION

The impact of European settlement on the natural environment of West Gippsland has been profound, and for this reason it is helpful to outline the major events of the settlement process. The region is a beautiful and fascinating one which for special reasons was opened up for occupation by Europeans later than other parts of Victoria. The present day features of the human landscape cannot compare with the great homesteads and comely towns of the Western District nor with the pleasant and interesting settlements of the belt of sustained gold mining in Central Victoria. It is easy to underestimate the scope and intensity of man's activities in Gippsland. The rare historic features give no true indication of the calibre of the pioneers of West Gippsland who expended great spirit, courage and endurance in subduing this difficult environment. Other speakers in this symposium will describe the steep and broken relief, the swamps, the coasts and above all the luxuriance of the eucalypt forests promoted by the sustained and heavy rainfall. These were the major challenges, since the complications of a hostile and resourceful indigenous population or of a dangerous fauna such as opposed the frontiersmen of the North American forests were absent. The aboriginal tribes were already in decline when effective settlement began, and in any case seem always to have avoided

heavily forested country: the native fauna, to its cost, consisted of gentle unaggressive creatures.

### EARLY HISTORY

The coasts of West Gippsland, dominated by the great embayment of Westernport and the granite projection of Wilsons Promontory were surveyed very early.

In 1797 George Bass in his whaleboat navigated from Port Jackson to Westernport naming it 'from its relative situation to every other known harbour on the coast' (from Daley 1960, p. 102). His survey of the coastline from near Kilcunda to Lang Lang Jetty, Stony Pt. to Flinders, all of French Island and most of Phillip Island, is remarkably accurate. After missing Port Phillip and Westernport in 1800, the vessel *The Lady Nelson* made a complete survey of Westernport in 1801 and seeds were planted on Churchill Island.

England was at war with Revolutionary France. One of the less publicised activities of the latter was the encouragement of scientific research. The Institute of France had promoted the well equipped scientific mission of Nicolas Baudin to Southern waters. On his return a history and atlas were published showing the whole of the Southern Australian coast from Wilsons Promontory to the Great Australian Bight as 'Terre Napoléon'.

The British, in alarm at this French threat, established the abortive settlement under Lieuten-

\* 3 St. James Avenue, Mont Albert, Victoria 3127.

ant Collins at Port Phillip to forestall any claims by the French. Certainly the latter were fully aware of the vulnerability of the British antipodean settlements and it was only Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 which removed the French menace to these coasts. Again in 1824 the exploring vessel *L'Astrolabe* under D'Urville re-awakened the old fears.

As a precaution a settlement was established under Captain Wright, not far from Corinella on Westernport. In the meantime, sealers and whalers from Tasmania, often ruthless and desperate men, were operating from small primitive villages in safe sheltered harbours like Westernport and the east coast of Wilsons Promontory. By 1830 they had exterminated the sea elephants and decimated the seal population. In the season they collected wattle bark. Thus their activities were purely predatory. Once again fear of the French subsided, the little settlement at Corinella was abandoned and Westernport deserted.

### PASTORAL HOLDINGS

The establishment of the Port Phillip settlement and its recognition by Sydney promoted the opening up of grazing country out from Port Phillip at Dandenong, Cranbourne and Westernport. Eastern progress was blocked by dense and apparently interminable forests covering the country below the ranges and by a succession of treacherous swamps heavily covered with an almost impenetrable thicket of tea tree and rotting vegetation. In far east Gippsland beyond the Strzeleckis, the pastoral holdings were already established following Angus McMillan's epic journey from Monaro in 1838-41. The wreck of the *Clonmel* running mails between Sydney and Melbourne occurred at Port Albert in 1841. The resulting rescue and investigation operations opened the sea entry at this point to the settled eastern lands and this partly removed the necessity to find a land link between eastern Gippsland and Port Phillip. Count Strzelecki's expedition in 1840-41 had this aim, but appalling experiences in the great forest confirmed the impracticability of the route. When he finally won through to Westernport Strzelecki found a string of stations from Anderson's and Massey's on the Bass River to Robert Jamieson's at Tooradin. Cranbourne was 'a small place with several wattle and daub buildings with thatched roofs' and Dandenong 'a nice little village' (Daley 1960, p. 105).

Timber getters were opening up the red gum country round Dandenong, providing paving blocks and wharf planking for Melbourne. Dunbar's Hotel was their meeting place and also served

as the Roads Board and Council Chamber, the Church and the Court house.

Eastward lay Berwick where Captain Gardner had his run and where the township was surveyed in 1852. At first the farms grew potatoes and wheat for Melbourne and the diggings, later switching to dairying, cheese making and sheep.

In reality the pastoral holdings lay only round the fringes of the great forests, though on paper they extended over the whole of West Gippsland. Matthew Gibson for instance held the Wild Cattle Run, named after progeny of the cattle abandoned from the Corinella 1826 settlement. This run had an estimated 256,000 acres with a carrying capacity of 640 head of cattle.

Over all Victoria the 1850s saw the formation of Roads Boards, the forerunners of municipal bodies. Mail and coaching services were established and blacksmiths, wheelwrights, saddlers, boat-makers, bakers and builders moved out from Melbourne to the embryonic settlements serving the gold mining and selection areas. This brings us to the crux of the problem of penetrating the difficult country of West Gippsland, the opening up of the tracks.

### TRACKS INTO THE FOREST

As early as 1847 a horse track had been established from Dandenong through Berwick to Bunyip and on to Flooding Creek (Sale). Mrs. Perry, the indomitable wife of Bishop Perry, has left us a graphic account of this track when they journeyed over it in 1849. A few years later the Surveyor General decided to make a direct road through from Melbourne to Sale, and although steep gullies between Bunyip and Moe presented great difficulties, the coach road finally became available in 1865, eight years after the letting of the first contract in 1857. Stimulated by the gold discoveries at Walhalla, the settlements along this route flourished to the detriment of those on the Port Albert route (the Lower Gippsland Road).

Further south and running almost parallel, McDonald's track from Lang Lang to Morwell followed the less densely forested northern slopes of the Strzeleckis, having been surveyed in 1862 as a stock route from Sale. Unused for this purpose, it became the jumping-off place for selectors in the great forest. One of the first of these was James Baker who established his farm on the track just east of Lang Lang (then Tobin Yallock) in 1866. He became a legend of hospitality, helping selectors on their way in the great wave of settlement beginning in 1875. His story is interesting.

In 1852 he married Miss Dorcas Stephens in Gloucestershire (England). They embarked on

the bark *Old Early Grey* on Christmas Eve 1852. On May 4, 1853, Doreas gave birth to their first child; she landed in Victoria on May 6 and on May 8 went to work for Mr. Samuel Griffiths near Hobson's Bay for three months! Later husband and wife worked on the land they selected at Lang Lang. From there James wrote to the government in 1887 petitioning for fifteen acres of land for a cemetery, which was granted and—I quote James—'I had the pleasure of digging the first grave and read the first burial service' (James Baker in *Land of the Lyre Bird*, 1960, p. 381).

And so we come to the epic of the settlement of the great forest of the Strzeleckis. Eastward from Melbourne lay the belt of red gum forest, then on the foot hills open messmate and peppermints. In the west Strzeleckis, lower and less steep than in the east, blue gum formed the canopy with an intermediate storey of blackwood, hazel musk and wattles and as ground cover a thickly matted undergrowth of swordgrass and wire grass. Creepers, tecoma and wild clematis linked the forest layers together. The 1851 bushfires had burnt through these forests so that a good deal of this was regeneration forest by 1875. Further east on the higher Strzeleckis the mountain ash forests with their high humidity had excluded the fires and were in their virgin state when attacked by the settlers.

## SELECTORS

Those who came in and were successful left a remarkable record of their activities, coherent, detailed, vivid as though they knew that they were engaged in an operation of historic moment. (See *Pioneers of Gippsland* 1920, subsequently *The Land of the Lyre Bird* 1960). They were only rarely farmers and most were from quite unrelated callings, schoolmasters, seamen, newspapermen, wheelwrights, warehousemen and one tea-planter. The motives driving them to their here-lean tasks were ill defined: certainly the old deep seated lust for land, certainly the economic recession of the colonial seventies. Some of them, after experiencing years of heat and drought in North Victoria were attracted by the temperate climate and plentiful rain of Gippsland. They all shared the common misapprehension that abundant vegetation equated with fertile soil, being of course quite ignorant of ecological balance and of the consequences of stripping forest from steep slopes. In addition to these successful ones were the unrecorded numbers who succumbed to the difficulties of living for years on their capital, of battling with the plagues of caterpillars and forest regrowth, dishcartened by the rain-sodden tracks which were rivers of mud and by the econo-

mic problems of no markets for their products and of collapsing land prices at the end of the land boom. They came from all parts of Victoria, many from the Ballarat region, from Horsham, Geelong, Kerang, Melbourne, a few from Britain, some from New Zealand. They journeyed from the Albion Hotel in Bourke Street by coach to Lang Lang, and then, refreshed at Jimmy Bakers, walked up McDonald's Track to peg their selection. I quote (T. J. Coverdale in *The Land of the Lyre Bird* 1960, p. 106).

'It started almost at once, a dense mass of hazel and tall thick swordgrass. Entering this we saw a dark, narrow tunnel, seven feet wide, through which ran a canal of mud—the mousehole. Things did not seem a bit cheerful for the scrub looked dark and gloomy in that winter's afternoon.'

Their selections were 320 acres,  $\frac{1}{2}$  a square mile, in itself an uneconomic unit, too much for one man and his family, enslaving him in the burden of clearing, sowing for grass, and fencing. Understocked, the land rapidly reverted to forest. Stocked to capacity, there was no accessible market for milk or meat. Many of them were impressed with the beauty of the forest but only rarely are they sensitive to the pity of its destruction.

'No matter in which direction I looked all was the most astonishing and bewildering forest. The majestic tall trees of the extensive eucalyptus family with their clean cut poles towered aloft in the clear blue sky. They were surrounded with a wealth of beautiful undergrowth in which blackwood, musk, hazel and blanketwood mingled with the magnificent tree ferns. . . . In the midst of such a harmonious scene of beauty, I forgot for a time the stern necessity of my presence in this enchanting Eden' (W. McKenzie McHarg in *The Land of the Lyre Bird* 1960, p. 327). But alas today there only remains the vivid recollection of it all.

Others came in by the new railway completed to Sale in 1879, as far as Drouin, then up the old coach road. From the point later to become Poowong, McDonalds track crossed the Lang Lang river and where Horsley's or Holmes's or Scott's hotels offered comfort in the wilderness, tracks fanned out in all directions south-east along Whitelaw's track, south-west to Grantville, south to Inverloch. A few came in by boat to Grantville, and another group penetrated from Morwell along the Tarwin Valley.

The men came in first with an axe, a box of matches and a bag of provisions. Dressed in moleskin trousers, nailed boots, flannel undershirt and cotton overshirt, cabbage tree hat, they laboured incredibly to fell the trees, to burn, to pick up, to sow grass so that the animals could be brought in. They slept in tents, in rolls of bark,

in hollow logs. Bachelor housekeeping in the bush was not without its pitfalls and there are refreshing tales of boyish larks, trouble with washing, with breadmaking.

'As it was in the garden of Eden so it was here. Man came first and woman later.' (Mrs. W. J. Williams in *The Land of the Lyre Bird* 1960, p. 348-349). But here is the pioneer woman with her seven weeks old baby. 'We mounted our horses and proceeded to Kongwak . . . At last we came to what was supposed to be a clearing on top of a very high hill from which we could look down on the tops of the trees all round, except the narrow ridge where we came out, and on a ledge, some 200 ft. below, my husband pointed to what appeared to be some galvanized iron on top of a pile of logs and said, "There is your home". At first I could not speak and my eyes filled with tears. That one spot of iron in the midst of a sea of logs and stumps looked so desolate that my heart failed me for the moment.' And so she stayed, to bear her children, cook, wash, sew, nurse, isolated from the rest of her sex in a little enclosed cell of the forest. 'Oh how I used to love the early morning when everything awoke to new life. I would just stand and feast on the beauty and glory of it all.' (Mrs. W. J. Williams, loc. cit.)

Inevitably the forest had its tragic and macabre episodes, lonely deaths of women, violent deaths of men and the sad fatalistically accepted infant mortality far from any hope of medical care. But the decencies were observed. Jimmy Baker was not the only layman to read the burial service.

## GROWTH OF SETTLEMENTS

The little settlements grew, following closely the lines of the tracks. Poowong at the nodal point of all the tracks acquired its name. South of McDonald's track was Jeetho parish. North was Poowong parish. In the staunchly democratic manner of the times a meeting was called to decide the name between Jeetho and Poowong. South of the track were the church and the store. North of the track was the public house. An old Scot settled the issue. "Jeetho indeed! A gospel shop and a paltry tin pot store. I'll vote for Poowong!" (W. H. C. Holmes in *The Land of the Lyre Bird* 1960, p. 162).

They built their own schools, churches and athenaeum. The banks came in, the post office was established and the police station. Butter began to sell. The South Gippsland railway was completed in 1892 liberating them from the glutinous tracks. Timber mills were started and coal mines in the south around Outtrim, Korumburra and Jumbunna. All this development meant

the growth of towns, a market for their produce and greater mobility. A second wave of settlers had started to come in, in the late 1880s. The cells in the forest grew larger, the settlements moved closer together. The winds blew through, drying winds.

And in 1898 came the appalling reckoning—Nature's backlash. At the end of January, culminating on February 1st, Gippsland was savaged from end to end by repeated waves of bushfires, springing from neglected burns. At the end of the disastrous week, forest, homes, paddocks, fences, stock were incinerated.

'By the settlers themselves that strenuous week will never be forgotten. The long battle with the fires, the anxiety and crushing disaster in the end with its consequent worries, aged many of them more than the years of hard work. It was a cruel setback to them after all the years of struggling and tardy prospects of success. But the men who had cleared the great forest were not to be daunted even by such a disaster. They fought gamely on in spite of the odds and soon the prosperity of the country rose again, Phoenix like from the ashes.' (T. J. Coverdale, loc. cit., p. 359).

## SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENT

The rest of the story is an interesting one of the economic weeding out of the unsuitable land. By the 1930s three separate attempts had failed to bring the marginal lands of the eastern Strzeleckis into successful production. Thousands of acres on the steep cold slopes which had been cleared of their valuable mountain ash timber were reverting to scrub, blackberry and bracken. With great skill and enormous trouble the forests are now being partially restored by the Forests Commission and Australian Paper Manufacturers Ltd.

The lower more moderate slopes of the west Strzeleckis and the drained valley bottoms continue in productive animal husbandry, yet an ironic footnote is that in 1969 Australia exported \$76,000,000 worth of dairy produce under cost and imported \$170,000,000 worth of timber!

The future of the region undoubtedly lies in the exploitation of the great fuel resources to the north and south of the Strzeleckis. These developments have already entailed changes in the scale and distribution of settlement and will do so increasingly. Interest has inevitably receded from the Strzelecki axis north to the Latrobe Valley, south to the Bass Strait coasts and to Westernport. Here will be located significant subjects for research in settlement morphology. Perhaps one of the most interesting tasks in historical geog-

raphy is to abstract the factors which seem to control the ebb and flow of man's utilization of the land and for this purpose West Gippsland is a most rewarding study.

#### REFERENCES

- DALEY, C., 1960. *The Story of Gippsland*. Whitcombe and Tombs, Melbourne: 219 pp.
- Pioneers of Gippsland*, 1920. Republished 1960, *The Land of the Lyre Bird*. Gordon and Gotch, Melbourne, (2nd edition, Shire of Korumburra).
- REICHL, P., 1968. *Mountain Forests of Gippsland*. Thos. Nelson (Australia), Melbourne: 40 pp.
- Verbal communications from Mr. D. Dodd, Dumbalk North, S. Gippsland.
- The Dodd Collection of Contemporary Photographs, now in the Latrobe Library, Melbourne.
- Two television films, *Forest Giants* and *The Marches of Settlement*, produced for the A.B.C. Education Television, by Clifford Pleak, Melbourne, 1969. (Transmitted in Schools' Television Programmes, Melbourne, Victoria. Length approx. 15-20 minutes each.)